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**June 31, 2013 | By USCIRF**

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is deeply concerned by reports that Raif Badawi, a Saudi website editor, was convicted and sentenced on July 29 to seven years in prison and 600 lashes on blasphemy and other charges that violate international human rights standards. USCIRF also welcomed the US Department of State raising concerns about Mr. Badawi's conviction at a July 30 press briefing.

"The only thing Mr. Badawi appears to be guilty of is creating a platform on the Internet for religious debate in Saudi Arabia, a right he is guaranteed to under international law. All charges should be dropped and Mr. Badawi should be released immediately and unconditionally," said USCIRF Chairman Robert George.

The editor of the Free Saudi Liberals website, Mr. Badawi was arrested in Jeddah in June 2012 and charged with apostasy, "insulting Islam through electronic channels," and "going beyond the realm of obedience." In January 2013, a Saudi court determined there was insufficient evidence to pursue an apostasy charge, which carries the death penalty in the Kingdom. According to Mr. Badawi's lawyer, the court ordered the website to be shutdown.

"Religious freedom is severely restricted in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government bans most forms of public religious expression other than that of the government's own interpretation of one school of Sunni Islam and uses criminal charges of apostasy and blasphemy to suppress discussion and debate and silence dissidents," said Dr. George.

In a separate case, Saudi blogger Hamza Kashgari, detained without charge by Saudi authorities since February 2012, continues to face possible apostasy and blasphemy charges. During a USCIRF visit to Saudi Arabia earlier this year, Saudi officials stated that Mr. Kashgari was detained because he wrote statements on Twitter which "disturbed the public order," a crime in the Kingdom. Mr. Kashgari disputes these charges. Officials claimed that he continues to be held for his own safety because many Saudi citizens have called for his death and that he is being "educated" to express his opinions without arousing conflict or injuring the feelings of others.

USCIRF again recommended in 2013 that Saudi Arabia be designated as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, despite the Saudi government's progress over the past year on some policies and practices. Although the State Department has designated Saudi Arabia as a CPC since 2004, the Department put into place an indefinite waiver on taking any action in consequence of the CPC designation. USCIRF has recommended that the U.S. government replace the indefinite waiver of action with a limited 180-day waiver, during which time the Saudi government should advance and complete reforms, including those confirmed in July 2006 in U.S.–Saudi bilateral discussions.

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